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SUBJECT: PAPAL VISIT TO ISRAEL UNDERSCORES DIVISIONS MORE
THAN UNITY

REF: A. VATICAN 63
[1](#)B. VATICAN 57

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[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Pope Benedict XVI's May 11-15 visit to the Holy Land, while billed as a pilgrimage of reconciliation and peace, served perhaps more to underscore ongoing divisions between Jews and Christians, Muslims and Christians, Israelis and Palestinians, and Israel and the Vatican. Coming just days after yet another disappointing round of GOI-Vatican negotiations (ref. B), and just four months after Israel's Cast Lead military campaign in Gaza, the Pope landed in a minefield of competing narratives and public grievances that, despite his best efforts, proved impossible to navigate. While Israeli and Vatican officials publicly hailed the visit's success, many observers saw instead a series of missed opportunities, with real or imagined slights underpinning nearly every word uttered and every symbolic site visited by 82 year-old pontiff. END SUMMARY.

Conflict Apparent from the Beginning

[1](#)2. (SBU) Tensions began surfacing almost from the beginning of the planning process for the visit. Israeli Muslim activists aligned with the Islamic Movement's Northern Branch distributed leaflets condemning the visit on the basis of the Pope's perceived anti-Islamic bias. One such leaflet, written by the Imam of the Shihab a-Din mosque adjacent to the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth (the site of violent Muslim-Christian riots in 2000), said of the Pope, "A person who cursed the Prophet, who stood at the head of the effort to convert Muslims in Darfur, Indonesia and the Muslim world, who attacked Islam, praised America and drew near and fraternized with the butcher of Gaza - is unwanted here." Numerous other Israeli Arab activists (Muslims and Christians alike, including many Catholic clergy) criticized the planned visit on the grounds that it was premature and would reward Israel at a time when condemnation -- for the "war crimes" of Gaza and for the ongoing occupation -- would be more appropriate.

[1](#)3. (SBU) For their part, many Jewish nationalists and Holocaust survivors argued that Israel should not open its doors to a German Pope who in his youth belonged to the Nazi youth wing (against his will, according to the Pope), and who recently reinstated a Holocaust-denying Catholic Bishop to the Church rolls, before changing his mind and excommunicating him again. A cartoonist in the mass-circulation Yediot Aharonot depicted the Pope looking at a photo of Nazi mobs at the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum, and commenting, "That's me!" Others fretted that Israel was behaving too solicitously toward the Pope, and would end up handing over to the Vatican a number of important Christian holy sites in and around Jerusalem's Old City.

14. (SBU) As tensions arose over sites the Pope should visit and people he should meet, even the GOI entered the fray, with Tourism Minister Stas Misezhnikov (Yisrael Beiteinu) publicly lambasting the Vatican for scheduling a Papal meeting (later canceled) with the Israeli-Arab mayor of the Galilee town of Sakhnin, who Misezhnikov called "a terror supporter and warmonger who acts against the national interests of the state." The Vatican and GOI also fought a number of semi-public battles over whether, where and how the Pope should meet PM Netanyahu, and whether Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat should be allowed to host or even address the Pontiff as the leader of a divided and partially-occupied city.

How Not to Lay a Wreath at Yad Vashem

15. (SBU) On May 11, just hours after arriving at Ben Gurion airport, the Pope came under heavy fire for failing to more directly acknowledge German and Church -- and by extension his own -- guilt for the Holocaust during a wreath-laying ceremony at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial. Terming his remarks callous and overly abstract, a number of Israeli Jewish commentators blamed the Pope for acknowledging the Holocaust without making a clear apology, and for failing to mention the exact number of Holocaust victims (he said "millions" instead of "six million"). Many Israelis were also annoyed that the Pope used the softer phrase "were killed" instead of the stronger "were murdered" when describing the fate of European Jewry, and failed to directly mention "Germans" as the perpetrators. Many others criticized him for failing to mention the ongoing scourge of anti-Semitism during his remarks, although he did earlier in the day during the arrival ceremony at Ben Gurion airport, where he also said "six million" when memorializing the

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victims of the Holocaust.

16. (SBU) Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin summed up the public mood when he later told the press, "I didn't come to (Yad Vashem) just to hear historic descriptions or the fact that the Holocaust took place. I came as a Jew wishing to hear a request for forgiveness from those who caused our tragedy, and these include the Germans and the Church." In response to the Vatican's explanation that the Pope had previously acknowledged these issues in other statements and should not be expected to repeat himself, Rabbi David Rosen, an important Vatican contact and one of its most enthusiastic defenders in Israel, also expressed disappointment, saying the Pope's remarks demonstrated a "lack of emotional understanding on the need to say certain things in certain places even if you've said them before."

17. (SBU) The visit to Yad Vashem also underscored another GOI-Vatican dispute, as the Pope refused to enter the memorial's museum because it contains a display criticizing his wartime predecessor, Pope Pius XII, for failing to defend European Jewry during the Holocaust -- a display which the Church and many Catholics argue is inaccurate and offensive. While both sides sought to conceal the dispute, the ghost of Pius hung over the entire ceremony, making Benedict's unemphatic remarks even more acutely disappointing to many Jews. (Note: The Vatican and GOI have been at severe odds in recent years over Benedict's desire to canonize Pius.)

The Perils of Interfaith Dialogue...

18. (SBU) Later that same day, the Pope attended an interfaith meeting hosted by the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land (which is partially funded by MEPI and USAID). Near the end of the gathering, the Chief Muslim representative, President of the Palestinian Sharia Courts Sheikh Taysir Tamimi, hijacked the microphone to deliver a five-minute indictment against Israeli "war crimes and

aggression," prompting Israel's two Chief Rabbis to vow to withdraw from the Council as long as Tamimi remains a member.

Concerned that the fiasco would jeopardize the Pope's mission to promote peace and interreligious dialogue during his visit, the Vatican later issued a statement criticizing Tamimi's unscheduled intervention as a "direct negation of what a dialogue should be."

...And Other Embarrassments

¶9. (SBU) The remainder of the visit ran into a series of other, smaller controversies. Many Israeli Jews were riled by live television images of the Pope's reception ceremony in Bethlehem, shot against the backdrop of the massive concrete separation barrier (complete with fortified guard tower) that made it appear as though the Pope was visiting a maximum security prison. Many Israeli Arabs, on the other hand, were irked that the Pope did not take a strong public stand on Gaza or point fingers for the continuing discrimination against their communities. Israeli organizers were also reportedly annoyed by Latin Patriarch Fouad Twal's welcoming remarks for the Pope at the Garden of Gethsemane, which dwelt on the "unjust occupation" and was highly critical of Israel (though in a more restrained way than Tamimi's earlier outburst).

¶10. (SBU) MFA planners, for their part, were embarrassed that Interior Minister Eli Yishai, the head of the Sephardic Ultra-Orthodox Shas party, refused a Vatican request -- timed to coincide with the Pope's visit -- for 500 multi-entry visas for Catholic clergy whose pastoral work requires frequent travel. Despite an interagency appeal from the MFA and National Security Council, Yishai denied the visas on the grounds that they would represent a security risk (most of the clergy are Arab).

John Paul's Visit was Better

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: GOI, Church and interfaith figures involved in the Pope's visit all told Poloff that the visit, while difficult, was an overall success. In doing so, they each went to great pains to paper over the various hiccups in order to focus on the Pope's message of peace and reconciliation (in the case of Church and interfaith figures) or Israel's belief that the visit will lead to greater tourism revenue from Christian pilgrims (in the case of GOI officials). But while immediate stakeholders might be willing to look at the bright side, it seems clear that this visit fell far short of the high expectations established by

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Pope John Paul II's widely praised Millennium pilgrimage in ¶2000. To be fair, John Paul II's visit took place before the collapse of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations at Camp David and the ensuing outbreak of the Second Intifada, events that served to poison intercommunal relations within Israel, as well as between Israelis and Palestinians.

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